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AUTHOR Swain, Caroline H.
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ABSTRACT

The author mentions findings of research on teacher morale and points out supportive roles which school personnel can play in helping teachers of emotionally handicapped students. Among the supportive settings listed are informal conversations, supervisory conferences, staff meetings, and inservice training sessions. Eight supportive roles which fellow teachers, building principals, professors, consultants, and special education resource personnel can play are discussed: the highway paver (who handles administrative details efficiently and competently), the consistency provider (who deals with behavior management), the anger director (who helps the teacher identify sources and targets of her own anger), the perspective lender (who helps the teacher in determining the importance of a situation), the assurer and critiquer (who helps when the teacher is going through a period of self doubt), the alternative generator (who offers a repertoire of possible interventions), the curriculum enthusiast (who assists in new project areas), and the self (who is the teacher who can find supporters and try not to take criticism personally). (SB)

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FOR SURVIVAL AND BEYOND

Providing Support for Teachers of Emotionally Handicapped Students

Caroline H. Swain
Director of Education,
Daniel Memorial
3725 Belfort Road
Jacksonville, FL 32216

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ABSTRACT

In order to survive in the classroom and go beyond survival to effective teaching, the teacher of emotionally handicapped students needs the assistance and support of other professionals. This paper discusses eight supportive roles which supervisors, fellow teachers, administrators, professors, and special education resource people can play in order to help the teacher work effectively while avoiding "burnout". These roles can be played in a variety of settings, including supervisory conferences, inservice training, staff meetings, and informal conversations.

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For Survival and Beyond: Providing Support for Teachers of Emotionally Handicapped Students

Caroline Swain
Director of Education
Daniel Memorial

Teachers of emotionally handicapped students, because of the nature of the students, work in stressful situations. In order to maintain levels of morale and the basic sanity needed for effective teaching, the teacher needs to be supported by administrators, special education resource poeple, and fellow teachers. This paper discusses eight supportive roles which can be used to help teachers work with disturbed and disturbing children. This topic is especially timely because of the shortage of E.H. teachers -- a shortage brought about partly by the fear of perspective special education teachers that they are not prepared to handle the behavior problems in the classroom and partly by the dissatisfaction ("burnout") of teachers who feel isolated in emotionally-charged classrooms.

The literature on leadership and supervision discusses relationships between leadership styles, employee satisfaction, productivity, and group cohesiveness. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review this literature in detail; a number of studies have reached conclusions which are pertinent to this paper:

1. Teacher morale is related <u>both</u> to the supervisor's efforts to accomplish tasks related to the goals of the organization and to his concern for employees' welfare.

2. Administrative policies and practices may have more of a negative effect on morale if they are sources of discontent than a positive effect if they are handled effectively.

3. A principal can either criticize the actions of teachers or praise them; he will damage morale if he is aloof.

4. Teacher morale is enhanced when leadership among teachers is fostered and when teachers are encouraged to participate in making decisions on matters which are important to them.

In the last few years teacher morale has been widely discussed, usually in terms of teacher "burnout." Whether burnout is seen as a physiological response to stress, as a psychological state of isolation, or as job dissatisfaction, it provides a consistent message to special educators -- teachers need support in the classroom in order to survive and in order to go beyond survival to effective teaching.

The support teachers need can be provided by a number of people in a variety of settings. Each setting has its unique advantages and can be effectively used in different circumstances:

1. Informal conversations have the advantage of immediacy in responding to events which call for a supportive response. Conversations which are prompted by immediate teacher needs can be moments of increased openness and willingness to learn.

2. Supervisory conferences provide advantages of privacy, uninterrupted exchanges of thoughts and a setting conducive to problem-solving. They are not effective if informal conversations do not also take place. Such conferences also provide a setting where written reminders are easily obtained.

3. Staff meetings can provide opportunities for peer group support for the teacher and are especially effective in providing perspectives through others' eyes and for generating alternatives.

4. In-service training sessions can focus on problems common to a number of teachers and so are effective in combating isolation. In order to be supportive of teacher professional development, in-service training should be planned as a comprehensive program including:

   - educational diagnosis, clinical assessment, and behavior management in order to increase abilities to meet the individual student's needs.

   - communication skills, self awareness, and team building in order to increase the teacher's sense of personal effectiveness.

   - goal setting, methods, and materials in order to strengthen instruction (teachers presenting their work with students to other teachers is a good learning device).

   - relationships of teachers with other segments of the educational system in order to build administrative efficiency and encourage use of available resources.

   Especially for new teachers, questions of priorities, (what topics are most <u>important</u> to discuss first and what topics teachers are most <u>ready</u> to discuss first) are important.

Eight support roles which people can play to help teachers of emotionally handicapped students are presented below. In discussing these roles few assumptions are made as to who will assume the roles; fellow teachers, building prinicipals, professors, consultants and special education resource people are all prime condidates. The most important factor is not who plays the role and in what setting, but that the role is performed when the teacher needs it.

1. Role of the Highway-Paver

All teachers need "highway pavers," the administrators who provide support by seeing that administrative details are handled efficiently and competently. The support person who willingly shepherds through referrals or supply-orders, who obtains educational records and sets up I.E.P. conferences, frees the E.H. teacher from expending time and energy on making bureaucracies respond. The predominance of horror stories about bureaucratic efficiency show that negative happenings tend to be remembered while the positives are forgotten. For example, a physical education order which is held up for months by varying ordering procedures will be a source of exasperation far outweighing the level of satisfaction realized in a smoothly running system for IEP conferences.

The basic administrative highway paving functions are especially important for E.H. teachers. When they are handled effectively, the E.H. teacher can feed off the stability of the system, and be better able to cope with the inherent instability of her troubled students. Energy saved in a smoothly running administrative system is a significant contribution to the classroom.

The highway paver role is the supportive role which requires the clearest definition of who is to do what. Administrative responsibilities must be clearly described and delegated. Some administrators may think this is the only support role which needs to be played; it is a basic role, but there are others which are at least as important.

2. Role of the Consistency-Provider

The virtues of consistency in behavior management are widely recognized among educators, yet consistency can be elusive especially when teams of people are involved and are confronted by manipulative children. A situation illustrates the point. Jamie has become so excitable in class that the teacher has asked her to engage quietly in an individual task for a few minutes before she rejoins the group. At that point a team teacher enters the room, sees Jamie pouting, and enthusiastically encourages her to participate with the group. At the very least teachers need to support each other by discussing instances like this when one teacher has undermined the other.

Manipulative students can put a great deal of pressure on staff relationships by testing staff efforts to maintain consistency. A typical test in this process is the comparison of teachers. ("How come we never do anything decent in this room? We behave in Mr. Smith's class because he's a good teacher and he lets us get out of our seats anytime we want".)

A residential treatment center provides an example of a setting in which a high (though still imperfect) degree of consistency in behavior management can be accomplished. The teacher can find strength in not having to respond alone; other teachers, child care workers, and social workers can devise interventions which provide a united and consistent program for a child.

3. Role of the Anger-Director

Angry children have countless means of including teachers in their conflict cycles -- refusing to work, not responding to "motivation", defying authority. Prompted by the pressures of the "children who hate," and their own frustrations at not being able to succeed, teachers can become angry with the student, with other school personnel, or with themselves. Teachers who are involved in a child-centered environment can also perceive parents as the villains responsible for the child's problems. It is assumed that emotionally troubled children will get angry and express their anger in impolite language, physical aggressiveness, or in passive aggressive ways. It is assumed that their teachers may become angry too. It is not assumed that teachers will be left alone to personalize the child's anger or to direct their own anger in inconstructive ways.

The role of the Anger-Director is to help the teacher identify the sources and targets of her own anger. The Anger-Director needs to be within fairly immediate reach of the teacher and have sufficient understanding, yet sufficient emotional distance, to be helpful. A person who is overly sympathetic or is frightened by the teacher's anger cannot support the teacher who is confronted by anger; the teacher who lacks support in dealing with anger cannot help the angry, troubled child.

4. Role of the Perspective-Lender

Under the pressures of intense involvement with students, the teacher encountering a different behavior or seemingly bizarre story may wonder "How important is it?" The new teacher sometimes lacks the experience to sort out the impending national disaster from the transitory element. Even the experienced teacher who has worked with disturbed children for a period of time may lose perspective on what is normal or age-appropriate behavior. Furthermore, the situation of judging the seriousness of the occurrence can be complicated (as in sex-related behaviors or suspicions of child-abuse) if the teacher feels uncomfortable about relaying the information.

The Perspective-Lender can do several things to be supportive in a situation of determining the importance of the situation:

1) Put the event in a context of history of that child.

2) Put the event in the context of experiences with other children. (I remember instances when this type of thing happened before . . .)

3) Provide feedback on the relationship between the teacher and student from another person's point of view.

4) Assure the teacher that her instincts are often valid.

5) Provide encouragement and mechanisms for the teacher to relay information to psychologist, social worker or psychiatrist in order to gain their perspectives and in order to add pieces to their views of the child.

6) Encourage teachers to leave their classrooms to visit other school settings, teach other children, and attend classes and conventions with other teachers who have had similar or different experiences.

5. The Roles of Assurer and Critiquer

The roles of Assurer and Critiquer are closely related to directing anger and lending perspective, since in either of these latter two roles the support person may reassure or be critical of the way the teacher is viewing a situation. When a teacher is going through a period of self-doubt, knowing that others have experienced similar difficulties with students can help reduce isolation. In relating a similar incident ("It happened to me too and I remember how miserable I felt."), the support person both lends perspective to the present occurrence and can be reassuring. One instance in which any teacher (of any size, male or female) needs reassurance is following a physical restraint of a child. The teacher's anger has been goaded, her self-control tested, adrenalin has flowed to meet the body's demands, and after the restraint, guilt, confusion or an exhilaration over successful control may dissolve the teacher into exhaustion or tears.

On the other hand, the "you poor thing" response may gloss over real problems, and convince a teacher that she need not learn from the situation. In the case of a physical restraint, for instance, a critical review of the happenings may reveal stages when escalation toward restraint could have been avoided.

In other instances as well, the teacher needs to be led to critically review her actions, and although difficult, it is supportive to the continued development of her skills and confidence. Formal written evaluations are most helpful when they come out of a process of discussing in evaluation conferences the teacher's strengths, weaknesses and goals. Checklists completed by supervisors unfamiliar with the teacher's work serve bureaucratic purposes, but provide little support for teacher growth. Eventually, some teachers may need to decide that working with disturbed children is not where their skills are, and a supervisor or fellow teachers will need to lead or support teachers in making this decision.

6. The Role of Alternative-Generator

This role follows the "two heads are better than one" principle. Emotionally troubled children are fully capable of behaving in predictable or unpredicatable ways which call for management techniques more creative than a single mind can devise alone. A repertoire of possible interventions can help a teacher counter the frustration experienced in not making progress with one approach. Other teachers can also help the teacher generate options for teaching techniques and materials, and perhaps more importantly , for more relevant or realistic goals.

Going outside the teaching profession to utilize mental health professionals can be extremely fruitful if the teacher is open to their

ideas and willing to adapt ideas from outside the classroom to her educational setting. An Alternative-Generator who mentions ideas may be effective with the teacher who "buys" one of them to try out; however, people typically need to be able to practice new approaches before they are adopted with any comfort. Thus, inservice training sessions with practice components are most helpful in encouraging teachers to try alternatives methods.

7. Role of the Curriculum Enthusiast

Just because students are labled emotionally handicapped, doesn't mean they can't learn important things in exciting ways! Much of the discussion so far on supporting E.H. teachers has been based on the assumption that they are managing behavior problems. Yet behavior control is a means to learning, not an end in itself. Teachers may need only an expression of enthusiasm to help them develop their own good curriculum ideas -- simulation games, science fairs, ethnic studies, or special field trips or play performances. Particularly an inexperienced teacher will also need assistance in planning (or even over-planning) the detailed structures needed for success of a project.

After projects or new ideas have been developed, teachers tend to keep their invention a secret, thinking that no one else cares, that everyone knows, or that little genius has been used in fashioning the creation. This is a sad mistake, and the Curriculum Enthusiast has a responsibility for encouraging teachers to share their work with others in conventions, university classes, in-service training or publications.

8. Role of the Self

All of the roles discussed above can only support the teacher who is ready to be supported by others. The Self plays a pivotal role and has several responsibilities:

1. Know where you can find supporters. Don't say there are none (although it may look that way) unless you teach on a desert island and have neither students nor a radio. Remember that a number of people can be supporters.

2. Let your support needs be known. Try to spell them out clearly to potential supporters.

3. Alert others to your own pattern of silent distress signals.

4. Believe in what you're doing. Trust yourself for the talents and abilities you have, especially when some other areas seem insecure.

5. Try not to take criticism personally. If others have to be too careful not to hurt your feelings, you will cut off important avenues for your own growth.

6. If you are ever in the mood to say, "No one cares, I'll just do the best I can in my own room," holler for help. Your contemplated

isolation is dangerous. Never give up educating other professionals about your needs, and attempting to meet theirs. If you give up, have the courage to do it completely and leave the classroom.

Teachers of emotionally troubled students have a difficult, but not impossible, job. They can provide the consistency and stability the students need, along with a caring and nurturing atmosphere, in order to learn. Because their position is stressful, they need to know that others are available to support them by removing administrative barriers, helping them provide consistency, providing perspectives to help them deal with anger and discern the seriousness of the happenings, by assuring and critiquing, generating alternatives, and encouraging curriculum ideas. With support, and with their own willingness and abilities, teachers of emotionally troubled students can go far beyond survival to being effective in the classroom and significant contributers to the community.